

ESL in China: A New Life Traveling the World on Empty Pockets

By Steven Ayy

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IFastball – The Way

I They made up their minds and they started packing
They left before the sun came up that day
An exit to eternal summer slacking
But where were they going without ever knowing the way?
They drank up the wine and they got to talking
They now had more important things to say
And when the car broke down they started walking
Where were they going without ever knowing the way?
Anyone can see the road that they walk on is paved with gold
It's always summer they'll never get cold
They'll never get hungry, they'll never get old and gray
You can see their shadows wandering off somewhere
They won't make it home but they really don't care
They wanted the highway, they're happier there today, today

Disclaimer: I discuss what I can about the teaching culture and life in other countries but this is primarily a book about China. I do not endorse or advertise anything mentioned in here without my own personal experiences and satisfaction. You are not me. Becoming a teacher is a rewarding path but you must have a certain level of charisma, attention to detail and above all else no fear.

Introduction

A crying baby keeping me awake. The food is awful. I'm currently on a flight from Beijing to Vietnam. I'm flying China Air, honestly my most hated airline, and none of the in flight viewing options work at all. "How did I even wind up here?" I wonder, "to the point where I travel so often I can complain about it?"

I was born in Toledo, Ohio, one of the most miserable cities in the United States. I graduated high school by the skin of my teeth. I floated around Community Colleges for a while and worked a few years as a substitute teacher. It is not a glamorous, or well paid, job and the work is the opposite of consistent. I was born poor and figured I'd die poor. I had never left my country, hell, I barely left my home town. Then one day I got on a plane to China and after only one year I have a few thousand dollars in the bank, a beautiful wife to die for and I'll be visiting my sixth country for pure vacation. How did this happen?

If you have downloaded this eBook it is likely that you are looking for a massive change to your life. ESL teaching abroad is often times seen as an easy job for young people in Western countries to stumble into, save money and see the world. I won't argue with any of that.

I often make the joke that meeting other ESL teachers abroad is like prison. You will meet people from other countries, backgrounds and culture but we can always start the conversation with "So what did you do to wind up here?" Some are just paying off student loans and heading home in a year or two, others are diving in to murder a boring life and create a new identity while there will always be the ones (you want to avoid) who are running from some tragic past. They will likely tell you all about it over a dozen beers.

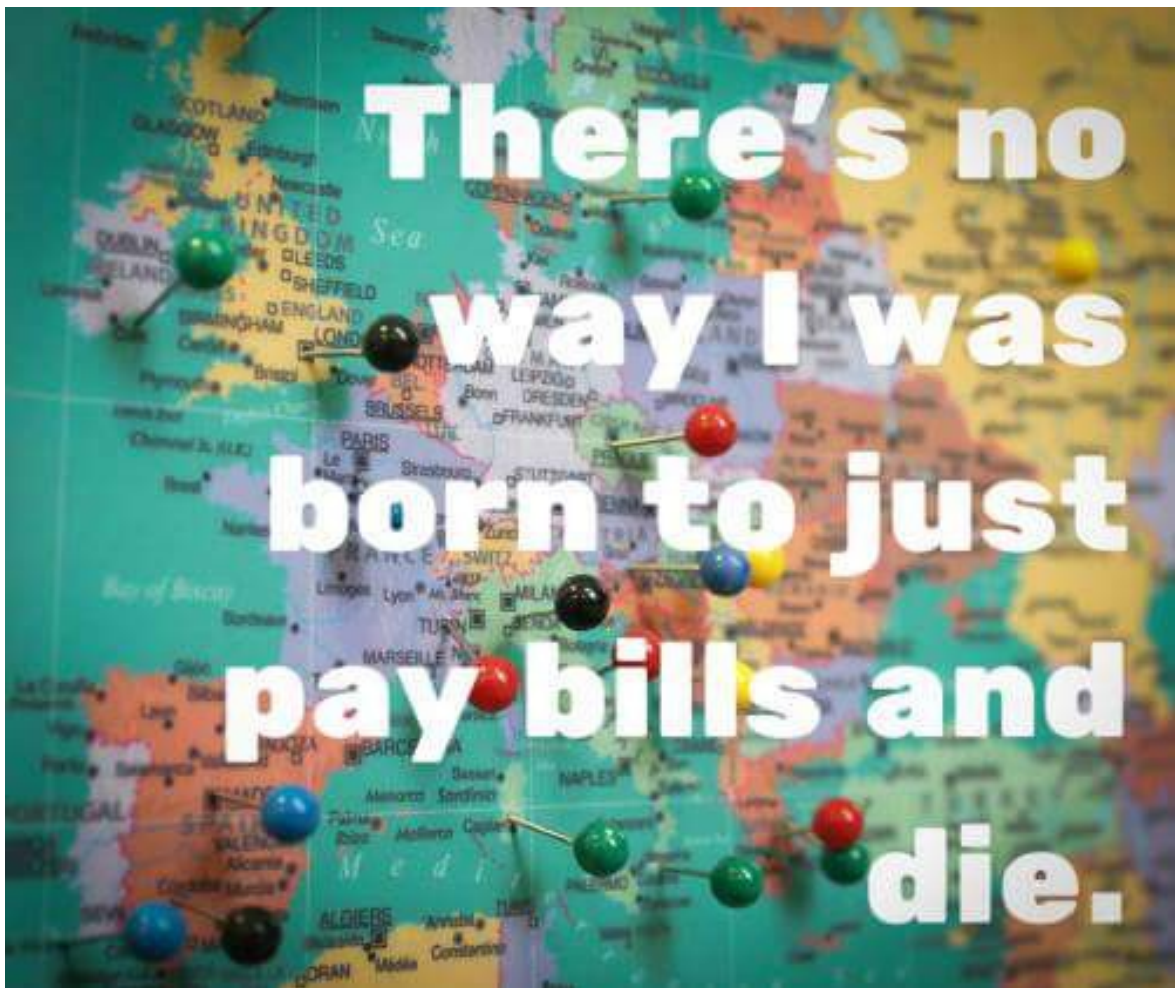
For whatever reason I always think about the song "The Way" by Fastball. It was a quick 90's hit that I heard when I was about 13 but is always right there on my mind. Its the tale of a group of friends who decide to leave their lives behind and chase "eternal summer slacking."

Thats how my life feels. Eternal summer slacking.

I wear shirts with cartoon characters on them, to afford my trip to China I sold a decades old comic book collection for peanuts, I've never bought a TV with my own money before in my life, I am a kid.

This book is for everyone out there seeking eternal summer slacking. 20 hour work weeks in foreign lands, struggling to order food because you know its all good, devouring self help and inspirational audio books as you jog along the third new beach of the year.

This is for The Culture Bums.



There is no way I was meant to pay bills and die.

About the Author

My name is Steven, I am 29 and I am a Culture Bum. I moved to China in 2014 to be an ESL Teacher and I absolutely love it. I travel when I can, love the work I do and keep up on what's going on in China. I'm a vegan (weekend vegetarian) and try to provide a positive spin on fitness and dieting while on the go. I document my experiences on my website, <http://theculturebum.com>, and on [Youtube](#).



My Story and Who Would Want to Teach ESL

I don't want to bore you this early but I want to let you hear more about my first few weeks in China.

Now I didn't own a lot but I sold everything I owned. I gave my clothes to friends I knew could use them, a few old cell phones I had laying around, put all my furniture on Craigslist, I cancelled my Verizon and bank accounts (I didn't want to find out I owed hundreds of dollars in fines that were incurred when I was abroad) and I generally just went for broke and dove in.

After my ticket and visa I landed in Beijing with \$600.

Now I went to China after losing a girlfriend, sputtering around between fill-in teacher gigs and generally having no point in staying where I was. I was going to join the CSX rail line but didn't meet some qualification or another, ditto for flight attendant, so I did a Google search and landed on teaching English abroad.

It is so hard to explain the look and feel of China, or Beijing, without you ever actually being there. The tall monotonous buildings, over and over, jutting into the sky with vegetable and fruit markets on every corner dotted with old men gambling, it can take some getting used to.

I was picked up at the airport and I still didn't have that moment of "WTF HAVE I DONE!" There were Burger Kings and English signs everywhere. When I started driving through Beijing it was hitting me more and more but roads can be from anywhere. The pollution was thick that day but I could still see the massive food markets and other distinguishing Chinese sights.

Tell me if you fit any of the following motivations that drive an ESL teaching career.

Seeing the World

There are English teaching positions available at all times in China, South Korea, Japan, Russia, Cambodia, India, Vietnam, Mexico, Costa Rica, Thailand, Nicaragua, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Italy, I think you get the picture. Almost half the world is open for you to apply in and some of these countries are the paradises people work 60 hours a week and save up all year just to spend a week in. You could get paid to live in someone else's fantasy and every year hop on a plane and start all over again somewhere else.

I know many people who major in a language or cultural studies and decide the best use of their background is to immerse themselves. People move to South America to perfect their Spanish, travel to Japan or Korea after being lifelong fans of the popular culture or maybe spend a year in Thailand to enjoy the weather. Saving up for a year to spend a week in your dream destination doesn't cut it for some.

Save Up Money

I have been working in China the past year. My salary averages between 9-12,000 RMB a month, depending on how much side work I do, or about \$1,500-\$2,000. In the United States or Europe this will barely keep your head above water paying rent, utilities, car payments, insurance, food, clothing, cell phone and any chance at saving actual money will be dashed by a Friday night with your friends.

In most Asian and South American countries your rent and bills are minuscule in comparison. A nice two bedroom apartment is less than \$300 a month, \$200 if your willing to have a room

mate, my phone is about \$10 a month, taxis are so cheap most foreigners take them for even the shortest distances and your average lunch will be less than \$3 as long as you don't go to McDonalds everyday. There should be no problem in saving \$800+ a month.

Become a New Person

Some people just don't grow up with the environment of traveling the world. I wasn't exactly wealthy growing up and I never even had a passport until a month before I arrived in China. None of my family were travelers so it just never came up. Despite all that I knew deep down it was something I had to do. Teaching ESL requires no pre-requisite but a passion for teaching and the willingness to commit yourself for a period of time. A lot of the teachers I meet are more than happy to do the work in exchange for the experience it allows.

Once you actively decide that this is a job path that interests you there are many variables to consider. Where you wind up will be the top of the list. Depending on your situation you may be going after ease of lifestyle, money or checking off a bucket list.



Where Should I Start?

If you are interested in jumping off your world travels with ESL you should figure out what country to go to get started. You have to factor in safety, ability to save money and a “can I handle it for a year?” factor. The best place to get started is one of the most foreign and misunderstood.

China.

Thailand and Cambodia may offer the better environment and scenic views, Italy and Spain are international cultural and historical hubs and Japan and South Korea pay more but China has several unique factors that sets it above the rest.

Why China?

Salary vs. Cost of Living

The average salary in Europe (Spain is the most popular) for a new teacher will be between \$900-\$1,350 per month (<http://www.gooverseas.com/blog/teaching-english-in-spain-salary>) so saving money or partying more than twice a month will be tricky.

Japan and South Korean offers will be an average salary of \$2,000 a month (<http://www.gooverseas.com/blog/salary-expectations-for-teaching-in-japan>). The only catch is the cost of living in these countries is so much higher than China. Your rent, cost of food, clothing, public transport etc. will be double the amount in some cases and your savings will be a few hundred a month if you live very cautiously.

Smaller Asian countries like Cambodia and Vietnam offer a very cheap cost of living but salaries will peak out at about \$600-1,000 a month for first time teachers and your back in the same boat of only saving a few hundred a month while living very meagerly.

China offers a perfect middle ground. The salaries if Chinese people are around 2-3,000 RMB so if you are making 8,000+ you are earning triple the average local salary coupled with half the living expenses of the US or Europe. The average teacher in China is saving \$800-\$1,000 every month and can live quite a large life. If you are smart when applying and know what to look for all of this can be accomplished with a 32 hour work week.

Location

China itself is a mystery to most in the West. Once you land your stereotypes and expectations will be burnt right before your eyes. China is incredibly large and traveling is very easy and cheap by either train or plane. A foreign teacher will find more than enough natural beauties and expansive, culture filled cities to keep you busy for quite some time.

Traveling to countries such Thailand, Mongolia, Japan, Laos, Vietnam and Indonesia are just a few hour flight away from Beijing and often much cheaper than traveling from your home country. (Australians have it lucky!) You will receive quite a few vacations throughout the year ranging from 4 and 5 day weekends to a 2 week break in February. I never feel over worked or trapped.

Teaching without a Degree

China is the largest growing market in almost every metric. The population accounts for almost a quarter of the world and growing every day, there are more people in China on the

internet than in the United States and Europe combined and the GDP climbs by the second. With the one child policy affecting most married couples their child is seen as the one chance they have at creating a future leader which means hard work in school and after.

Because of this rapid growth the standards for hiring are much lower in China than other countries. A B.A. is not a definite requirement for gaining work privileges in the country. This gives older students who may have dropped out of college years ago and struggle to pay off debts to continue their education, or younger students still in the process who just want to take a break, a chance to save money and gain experience in the field.



Hassles in China

Nothing is perfect and there are certain things you should know about China before applying there. They have to do with race, legality and cultural norms.

Recruiting Agencies

Most first time teachers moving to China will have their arrangements taken care of by an agency. Agencies are a necessary part of the ESL hiring process that you may outgrow over time but almost everyone will first contact an agency online whether they know it or not. The agency is a middle man that secures you a visa to enter the country, handle your payroll, find you a school to work at and help you out when your first arrive and also after when your in dire need of someone to make sense it it all.

Some teachers, after they finish their first contract, will get a job working for the schools directly. You will make a little more than before (since the school is saving on the agency fees) but most of these guys will complain about payroll issues (bonuses not handled properly, Visa trips not paid on time, etc.) and once you lose the lifeline that keeps all of their apartment utilities paid, those responsibilities fall directly on you! The agencies in China definitely provide a service and I suggest all first time teachers stick to agencies for finding your jobs and taking care of your affairs for at least the first year.

Saving Face, Bribery, Forged Documents

One thing to keep in mind if you move to China is that little gets done without a little grease in the palm.

When I was applying for my Z Visa recently I was on a strict time schedule. My current visa was expiring in 2 weeks, I had already booked a flight back home to see my family but I was adamant to get back to China within a month to continue working. It is great to go home to see family and friends but with nothing to do you can overstay your welcome and burn through your funds that are better spent on a beach in Cambodia during the Spring Festival.

Since I was working for a University the staff in charge of foreign affairs had absolutely no incentive to speed things up. My semester started in 3 months so why would they rush around to get my visa prepared any sooner? I was proactive and got my physical, signed all the documents, etc. and would drop them off but never heard anything back. Finally I gave in and bought a few bottles of wine.

China has a "saving face" culture. You never want to outright embarrass someone or put them on the spot in a way that would cause them to "lose face" to their peers. Demanding an answer or a rigid time table will get you nowhere as they will not want to commit to anything that might change nor do they want to tell you no.

With a week to go before I left for the United States I dropped off 3 bottles of wine to the foreign affairs staff, each bottle only cost me 31 RMB, about \$5, and within an hour I received all the emails I was waiting for, signed contract papers and a few assurances that I would get my visa issued earlier than expected.

Applying without a College Degree

Almost every job listing you will find for ESL online is going to say "4 Year Degree Required." Don't let this stop you from trying. Because China (and other countries) have such high demand for teachers they are willing to overlook this fact. You will usually fall into an "illegal

immigrant" status I will talk about later but I would definitely still apply.

Just be honest.

When you submit an application to a school just say up front you do not have a degree. They will tell you whether they can hire you or not. Its a 50/50 chance in my experiences and those are good odds when your applying 5 times a day.

Political Correctness and Outright Racism in China and Elsewhere

China can be incredibly racist place if you are not white.

If your are a person of color I would greatly recommend seeking out a Youtube Channel called "Loser Laowai in China." (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC-G09c97zEqc9BNfVRNO3JQ>) It is run by a good friend of mine named Randy Flag, an African American from New York and a teacher in China for a decade now. He makes countless videos on teaching experiences, Chinese life, tips for expats concerning cultures or customs and he especially tackles racism.

I have seen schools, when reviewing candidates for teaching positions, immediately exclude black or brown people from consideration. Job postings online will say "white only" or exclude teachers (of any color) from countries such as South Africa simply because there is a lack of awareness between "Africa" and "South Africa" when selling the parents on the teachers.

This goes the same if you are extremely obese, have too much acne in your profile picture, are too old looking or bald, etc.

For training centers and most kindergartens, unlike public schools and universities, the parents have the option of sending their children anywhere they want. It is their money and there are more than enough options. A big factor in choosing schools is how they can brag to their friends that they have their children in an English academy being taught by a handsome, tall, beautiful, etc. white teacher. It gives them "face."

I will discuss this more later but when choosing what setting is right for you, if you are a person of color, there are some environments more welcoming than others.



How to Pick the Right Job

There are more than enough jobs to go around once you start looking. Sites such as eslcafe.com and echinacities.com are overrun with job listings to the point they all begin to blend together and picking the right one is a confusing mess. Most jobs available to new teachers will fall into 3 categories: Universities, kindergarten and training schools. Each has its own pros and cons and its important to find the right one that you will be able to do for a full year. There is nothing worse than the feeling of being trapped into a situation your just not qualified or prepared for. Over time any of these jobs will seem like a piece of cake but know your limitations.

The next section will deal with how to pick the right city.

Universities

Universities will be one of the more strict places to get into when it comes to having a degree, TEFL certificate and prior work experience. A smaller city will be more likely to overlook one of those but rarely all three.

Your work week is usually short, around 8-16 hours, but lesson planning falls completely on you. Lessons range from 45 to 90 minutes and ages are 17-25. The expectations for planning should be one hour of planning to one hour of teaching when you start and after your first year you will be more comfortable and can reuse last years lesson plans. If you have 10 teaching hours you should expect 10-15 planning hours making for a full work week. After your first year you will be able to reuse your lessons though.

This free time will allow you to explore your new home more, practice skills and hobbies and advance yourself personally OR look for side work (which I'll review later) and wind up making far more than you could in training centers and kindergartens.

Don't forget that since your a government employee you get **5 months paid vacation a year!** In both the winter and spring you will get 2 and a half months off for vacation and it is up to you what to do with it.

Salaries are not generous with an average in a smaller city outside of Beijing, Shanghai, etc. being about 5-8,000 RMB to start and larger cities closer to 7-10,000 RMB.

One of the pluses of University teaching, that I can't speak to personally, is that it is easier for black teachers, both Western and African born, to find full time employment. Lighter skin is valued in a lot of facets of Chinese life including their own. In the West we value a tanned look where as in China the paler you are the more beautiful. In private schools (mentioned below) where the parents are enrolling their children they will place a higher emphasis on white or lighter skinned teachers.

This isn't directly because of racism but some parents are under the impression there are no black Western native English speakers. Despite Barack Obama being President of the United States I have met a lot of Chinese people who aren't yet convinces there is a sizable black population in the United States.

Kindergartens

Kindergartens are usually private schools that charge a hefty sum to get children started at the age of 3 or 4 in learning Chinese. They are fairly easy to get into if you have any experience with the age group and can prove to be fun, active and dependable. The salaries

are competitive with the training centers (that we will discuss in a moment) at around 8,000-14,000 depending on the city (Shanghai for instance will start around 14-16,000 if your experiences), but, for many more hours.

A normal day in a kindergarten begins at 8:30. The bulk of your job is simply assisting the lead teachers in the kindergarten. Since your children are so young and likely have zero English skills communicating with them is impossible. The work is easy, just playing with the kids and keeping them from jumping off the roof, but extremely tedious. The day will go slowly for most as you watch the lead Chinese teachers do their duties. You will likely prepare meals for the children, participate in physical activity a few times a week and observe nap time (I usually took part in a nap myself). The most demeaning part of the kindergarten assignment will be when your youngest student uses the toilet and, yes, you will wipe an ass once or twice.

The teaching portion of your kindergarten assignment will be short but challenging if you are new. For experienced teachers it is a breeze. You are expected to do 1 or 2 English sessions, rarely more than 20 minutes at a time, and because of the age group it will consist mostly of songs, flash cards and games. You can find an endless stream of ideas online at <http://reddit.com/r/tefl>. My first few lessons in this setting were shaky and repetitive but now I am confident I could do an entire hour with only three flash cards.

Training Centers

I would say the bulk of ESL teachers in China find themselves in training centers. These are private after school programs for children, aged 4-13 or so, to attend a few times a week. The work week will average 32 hours of total time split between class (8-12 hours) and the rest office prep time. Pay will come in several streams such as salary, housing allowance and sign up bonuses (I'll explain in a second). I would never do this job for less than 9,000 and if you stay on for multiple years and have experience and a B.A. bringing home more than 12,000 RMB per month is definitely possible.

Most training centers will offer you a pre-made lesson curriculum. They are franchised out operations and so they fall in line with a set of expectations and standards. This makes preparing for your classes a breeze and lowers the curve for new teachers.

Because these centers are dependent on signups you will be required to do demo classes for potential new students. At first I was pretty scared of being put in front of parents to dance and sing while their children scream for help in the face of this six foot tall foreigner, but, now I can do them in my sleep. You get sign up bonuses for every parent that signs that can add a nice kick to your check as well.

The requirements for these centers vary based on the prestige of the franchise and the city you are applying in. Smaller cities are more desperate to attract teachers so no B.A., TEFL or experience poses no problem. You will be thrown in to sink or swim but these centers are, in my experience, the most patient in letting you come to grips with the work. Everyone has a bad session here or there but as long as the children (and especially the parents) like you I wouldn't worry about it. Chinese public schools are insufferably strict on the children, after school lets out a friendly face goes a long way.

Side Work

Every country you work in will have a "side work" industry for ESL teachers.

Side work comes in the form of private lessons with 1-4 kids in an apartment or office building, maybe fill in lessons at high schools or kindergartens, conversation practice and focused English classes on specific topics in training centers.

As a foreigner, especially in smaller towns, you will get stopped on the street and offered this type of side work. You may also get them from your circle of friends BUT keep these jobs a hidden secret, both your own and theirs. People get jealous and could alert your normal work.

Schools in China will often times include a provision in the contracts forbidding working for other establishments. As long as you don't open your mouth too wide this shouldn't be too much of a problem but keep in mind snitching in China often leads to promotions, including for other foreigners, so keep it very close to the chest.

Make sure you know the bus routes and schedule yourself so getting to work on time won't be a problem. Your ESL job is what got you to China and is more than likely keeping you legal, that should always be your first priority.

One on one private tutoring can pay you a minimum of 200-250 RMB per hour, don't accept any less. If people say no, keep on walking.

For private work in public high schools I am paid 500-800 RMB per hour, that is \$85-\$135 per hour. If you are working a job such as university that gives you open schedules all week these are sweet deals.

The biggest advice is to only to private work when you have the confidence in yourself to fill the time. If you are still in your honeymoon phase and find yourself in Sanlitun five nights a week, rolling out of bed ninety minutes before your due at work, this may not be for you. At least not yet. These jobs require an hour-to-hour planning (meaning if the class is one hour you should be spending around one hour planning before hand) and if you want to be called back you better look professional with a nice button up and a clean shave.

Working with older students they are going to want more structured sessions. You will often times be given a text book to plan with, almost always in English, and expectations can be all over the place. One of my math students only wanted to review English names and vocabulary. Her math was perfectly fine but the word problems were such a chore for her so the entire lesson was spent doing word problems. I would prepare in advance and make sure I had enough material to fill two sessions in the weird chance we hit a section she would blow past. It never happened but the thought of being stuck without pre-made material and flipping through the book for the first time with her is embarrassing enough to make sure that never happens to me. They know when your not prepared.

Premade Lesson Plans vs. Making Your Own

One of the biggest differences in your job experiences when teaching ESL is going to be whether you make your own lesson plan or whether it is pre made by the school. Most TEFL Certification courses will prepare you for this but doing it is another story. I had already been a teacher for several years in different settings in the United States so I'd like to think I had something of an edge when it came to expectations but I would be wrong.

My first job in China was working a kindergarten with a 30 minute "English Circle" every day. There were about 18 children with English skills from 75% fluent with a Western parent down to absolutely nothing, not hello, not hamburger, nothing. In these settings I did have to create my own lesson plans but with the age group (3-5) it was easy to put together plans with games, songs, etc. doing 1 week on learning 15 animals, 1 week on body parts, 1 week on food, then repeat. Repetition is key in these cases. The whole time I was observed by Chinese staff and given tips and criticism so after a few weeks I think I had a pretty good system.

Now I have heard (horror) stories of people from other countries such as Thailand or South

America where you will meet your class of 40+ 10 year olds who know absolutely no English. There is no lesson planning, stated expectations or staff oversight. After a year of ESL teaching I would be fairly confident in these situations but to start off with I don't think I would be very good at all.

My second job was in a training center. Training centers focus on after school programs, are separated into age brackets and tend to give you class content expectations if not fully prepared lesson plans. This was somewhere in the middle.

I showed up at 5:50 PM for a 6 PM start time (the subway only goes fast enough). I was thrown into a room with 7 kids and told "OK your teaching them Holidays. Just go on Bing and make something up. Your class is 2 hours." I'm wasn't mad, wasn't confused, but I definitely felt like I was in China. I got through the lesson plan, somehow, but I knew right there and right then that I would not enjoy myself in that type of a setting, finding out my lesson plan right when I walked in the door for a 2 hour class.

Right now I work for a training school that provides fully completed lesson plans. I get a schedule Wednesday as soon as I come to work so I can be prepped for Sunday classes by Thursday evening and then I can go on autopilot for the week. My lesson plans are all in the shared system, my classes are usually 40 minutes and my lesson plans are made to last 50-60 so I never run out of material, my crafts are provided, we use Interactive White Boards which help in keeping the kids engaged, it is the system I prefer big time.

In the past 4 months I have also taught a college English course with about 20 people for 90 minute classes but it was a "create your own lesson plan, we'll be across the building" system. I did pretty good and feel very confident now in my skills to make my own lesson plans.



Picking the Right City for You

There is a certain wonder about the size of China. I try to tell my family about just how crowded China is with 1.4 billion (with a capital B) people. A city like Cleveland, hovering around 3 million, is considered large in US standards whereas in China that's on the cusp of being small.

I chose Beijing when I initially moved to China. I wanted to have that insane experience. The subways, the culture, a larger expat community to get acquainted with, I wanted the full China experience and it really was like something out of Willy Wonka when I first arrived. I told myself I wouldn't allow myself to be surprised by anything, just do what you need to do and try to blend in.

Within a month I absolutely hated it and that is just my experience. The subway rides that were initially like a fun puzzle based video game to solve had become the bane of my existence that added an hour to every trip I had to take. The massive population brought with it pushing and shoving as well as a massive pile of stinky garbage on every corner. Industry and growth filled the skies with soot and particulate matter that I had to keep an eye on like the temperature.

I was feeling lethargic and tired constantly, gaining tons of weight because I was too tired and busy to cook (excuses I know), I never had time to explore the city and on top of that I had 5 room mates! I had to get up at 5 AM to get a hot shower.

I later moved to Hohhot. It is a Chinese city in the North of about 2.5 million people. I immediately had my rent cut in half from 3,500 RMB a month in Beijing to 1,600 in Hohhot and went from 5 room mates to living in my own in a 2 bedroom apartment. Taxis and meals were way cheaper and I was in much higher demand as a foreigner. Restaurants and bars will give you a few freebies (such as free vodka mix jugs) to keep you coming back (your almost an advertisement for how cool their establishment is).

You see, when you live in smaller cities (and in China anything under 5 million is considered small) you become more a hot commodity. Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing and other large cities have a never ending stream of backpackers and ESL teachers stumbling in throughout the year. With China's rapid wealth creation the past few decades the smaller cities are seeing massive growth opportunity and this includes for ESL teachers.

These small cities are willing to overlook certain aspects in hiring (degrees, skin color, experience, etc.) just to make sure that there are teachers in the class room to fulfill contracts that have already been sold to parents. The schools are usually not half as busy as the big cities, there is less oversight (for instance where I work we are supposed to fill out progress reports but because the school is so small no one has ever brought it up) and they will bend over backwards to keep you happy.

You may come to China (or anywhere) with an immediate urge to go places you've heard of but don't lose sight of life in the smaller towns. You experience more culture, have a better shot of finding your social niche and can save way more money as the months go by and it is vacation time.

The Visa and Startup Costs

The only start up costs associated with this step forward will be getting your passport (About \$110), if you don't already have one, the flight ticket to China (\$400), a medical check (\$45), a background check (\$40) and your Visa (About \$130). The one way ticket should never cost more than \$600 as long as you buy it a few weeks ahead and are flying from major airports.

The Visa is a tricky situation as you can enter China with a number of different Visa types, each with their own strengths and weaknesses. Every Visa (except an L, or, Tourist) will need an invitation letter from a school so keep that in mind. An invitation letter can be mailed from China or sent via Email depending on the whim of the school.

Z Visa

A Z Visa is an official working Visa. It gives you full residency rights meaning you never have to bounce back to “renew” your stay period, legal work privileges and you can even get a drivers license. You are, for all intents and purposes, a temporary Chinese citizen. This is the safest way to work inside of China.

The requirements of getting a Z Visa are that you have a college degree (because you have to prove to be a step above a regular citizen and only you can do the job your being hired for), pass a health check for STD's, blood pressure, etc. for insurance reasons and a **criminal background check from your state**. This is all used to create your invitation letter from the place you will work at.

The Z Visa locks you into the contract you are working under and makes it illegal to work for any other schools. If your school finds out that you are working elsewhere on the side they can terminate your contract on the spot giving you a short window to leave the country. It is very unlikely they would do any of that, they will just tell you to stop or ask for a cut of what your making at a different school. To change schools you need to get an exit letter from your work and, depending on how petty they are, this can be very difficult.

What if I don't have a College Degree?

I feel like this section should be covered again to ease expectations even more.

China is a very strange place caught somewhere between the old and the new. It is very modern in terms of infrastructure, technology and shopping but it is still stuck in the old when it comes to business. Bribery is king in China and nothing gets done without it. Not having a B.A. is not an issue and **fake or forged degrees work just fine**. Many ESL teachers will pick these up in Thailand where street vendors will rig you up a fake degree in less than 10 minutes for \$20. If you don't have one yourself the school will make one for you, whether you know it or not, and bribe it through the official channels. Once your Degree passes the mustard you will never have to present one again as it is kept on file for all future Z Visa applications.

This procedure will work in most Asian and South American countries as well. Japan, South Korea, European and most Middle Eastern countries aren't this easy. I would not recommend knowingly supplying fake degrees or documents to these places.

When applying for a job be as honest as possible about your situation with your school or agency. I have been told up front by schools that they are going to make me a fake degree. Sometimes they will even give it to you afterwards! What a country.

M Visa

An M Visa is a "Business Visa." Many schools will have you enter on an M or L (Tourist) Visa. An M Visa is classified as a Business Visa and allows you to enter China for either 60 or 90 days at a time, meaning every 2 or 3 months you have to leave the country and come back, often to either Mongolia or Hong Kong for ease and cost efficiency, and get a new stamp in your passport coming back. The M Visa is good for anywhere from 1 to 10 years at a time depending on what you select when first getting the Visa and what country you are coming from (The United States has the most lenient terms currently).

Now it is not technically legal to work on an M Visa. The reason schools will have you come over on an M Visa instead of a Z is because it costs less money to initially process the paperwork. There is a huge risk you will come to China and flake off after a few months and they are out a sizable investment. Most schools that ask you to come over on an M will offer a transfer to a Z Visa after a period of time (3 months usually) once you have proven your trustworthy. Transferring to a Z Visa is easy and can be done in Hong Kong.

You will see a lot of stuff on the internet about how you should never work on an M Visa and open yourself up to deportation. These stories usually link to a very famous story involving a Disney-franchised school that let several foreign teachers get rounded up, fined and deported because they worked on illegal visas.

The thing to keep in mind is that is one story. Out of over 10,000 schools across the country a tiny, tiny percentage every face these problems. Schools often times have "agreements" with police agencies to alert them when a "sweep" is coming (if ever) and you will be alerted to stay home that day.

In my year of working in China I have never met a single teacher that has ever actually witnessed, been involved in or tipped off to avoid a "sweep" and, if you don't work in a very large city such as Beijing or Guang Zhou, your chances drop to almost zero. A friend in Beijing had been working on an M Visa for five years, over 20 visa runs and 4 extensions with no problems.

Because you are not legally working inside China your apartment is usually under the name of an employee of your school or agency. Sometimes you will be paid in cash vs. a direct deposit (and if you do side tutoring it will almost always be paid in cash). You will be a ghost employee and not subject to taxes either in China or back home.

Because you are working illegally you have no rights or protection should your school break their end of the contract, should you have pay disputes or anything else. At the same time they can't legally make you stay if you want to leave after 4 months. If a new, better, shinier job rears its head you have every right to just leave because your M Visa is only held by you and has nothing to do with your school. They would never report you because then they would have to admit to illegally employing you. This puts you in a great position to negotiate and kind of guide your own future.

M vs. Z and also L

So what are the advantages of either an M or Z Visa?

A Z Visa will make you legal and safe inside China but it will lock you in for the duration of your contract, most likely one full year. If you are coming to China for the first time it is always possible you will be a bit shocked at the conditions of your working environment vs. what was promised and what you saw in photos. I've known several people who come over thinking it would be one thing and it turns into another.

An M Visa will keep you on your toes once in a while (and I would **NEVER** recommend telling anyone your Visa status if it is not a Z, either Westerner or Chinese) but it gives you much more job freedom. You can come and go from job to job, only do tutoring and freelance if that is what you want or, if you save up enough money, just be a hobo in China and travel around with no worries.

That is technically what an L, or tourist, Visa is for, if you just want to come to China as a tourist. I do not recommend coming to China with an L Visa if you want to work. They are harder to extend or transfer in the long run vs. an M.



Vacation Schedules

I feel like I had to tell people about the way China does vacations because no one ever told me.

China has a lot of vacations. There is the Spring Festival in February which will give you anywhere from a week to 20+ days off, mostly paid, October has Golden Week which is a paid week off and peppered everywhere on the calendar are 3 and 4 day weekends. Great! Right?

Kind of.

Let's say a 1 day holiday falls on Friday. You get Friday and Saturday off and everything is great! Be prepared to work on Sunday.

Let's say you get a week off in October. When you come back all of your half days will be expanded into full days.

They somehow, somehow always make it so you work more than you would if there just wasn't a holiday.

Should I get a TEFL?

The first step I made on my journey into ESL was getting a TEFL certificate. I chose one of the best outfits in the industry, the International TEFL Academy, and picked one of the more intensive programs. TEFL courses are categorized by how many hours your class lasts. Mine lasted several months and accounted for 170 hours of class time and a Level 4 TEFL Certificate. I figured this was going to be my career the next few years so, I needed to prepare myself for wherever it took me, no reason to start the cheap route.

When I began applying for jobs in China (where I chose to start my journey mainly due to a perceived need to save money) I was kind of shocked that no one really asked to see my TEFL Cert. Some of the jobs didn't specifically mention a requirement for a TEFL Certificate and the ones that did would see I had one on my CV, ask if I had one and then never bring it up again. Even after finding my first job and then getting a few more I've never once showed my TEFL Certification to anyone either in person or over email.

I had a coworker in Beijing who completed a 20 hour TEFL course online over a weekend and had the same job opportunities in China as me. The difference will be once we travel outside of China and the quality of our long term careers.

On the ground floor of ESL in China, kindergartens and training schools, a TEFL may not be a difference maker but when you start to apply for Universities and State run schools it will be asked for and factored in when hiring and negotiating salary. When traveling to countries like Thailand it becomes a larger difference maker in salary where jobs are high on beauty but low on entry level pay. European countries with lower criteria for hiring such as Spain and Italy will also use a TEFL Certification to weed through the applications.

You never know where your life will take you and I always like to be prepared. I went through my TEFL course and now I have it, no one can ever take it away from me, and the course work did help me prepare for my job. **The best resource your TEFL course will provide you is network of support and job offers.**

You get immediate access to alumni groups that offer an endless stream of information, job offers and advice as well as advisors within the school who have done this before and can steer you in the right direction whether that be reviewing contracts or helping you get the most out of your CV and experience. If you decide to take a TEFL course in person in another country such as Barcelona, Phuket or Mexico City they will practically guarantee you a job. They have the local connections of schools that always need new teachers, your already in the country with a Visa and if you want you can jump straight from school to the job without missing a heartbeat.

I think anyone who begins an ESL career with any intention of doing more than a year will eventually want a TEFL Certificate and some jobs will bring it up if you don't already have one. I know it gave me a small raise over another coworker who did not have one earlier this year and every dollar counts. Always think about your future because you never know where it will take you and no one likes being caught with their pants down.

How to Start Applying, Where to Look and Salaries

When you feel like your ready to start applying you want to make sure you have your CV ready before anything else.

CV

A Curriculum Vitae, or CV, is not a resume. A CV is a detailed overview of your accomplishments in the job field you are entering or attempting to enter. It has a specific format, that I find very easy to use and master, and look and it can be found anywhere online.

My only advice when making your CV is to focus on your strengths and hide your weaknesses. You are applying abroad, likely for a school without a lot of money earmarked for non-essentials, so don't feel ashamed to embellish and extend a 2 week summer camp you worked at into a 3 month gig or to focus on the teaching segments in the training seminars you hosted at work.

Obviously don't lie and say you have skills that you just don't have.

This is the same if you don't have a degree. If you were in college and never finished a degree just say so. List the college and say "No Degree Awarded."

Appearances

I've said it a few times already but just to reiterate China is NOT of progressively minded PC Place. The picture you include will carry a large weight on if they even read your CV or not. I've met dozens of teachers with tattoos crawling from their fingers to their neck and go to work with they're nose rings but I just wouldn't include it on the picture.

Include a professional head shot of yourself at the top of the page. I used to have one wearing a suit but since losing a lot of weight I've replaced it with a more casual picture. I'm wearing a simple red shirt but I'm still clean shaved, new hair cut and looking forward with a smile.

Don't hide who you are but I would recommend not having non-traditional hair coloring or visible facial piercings.

Where to Look Online

Odds are you'll be applying for a job you find online.

Whether cruising Craigslist or Monster you will be bombarded with ads to teach English abroad. With what I've talked already about Visas, agencies, type of classrooms, etc. you should have an idea of what to look for when it comes to distinguishing professional jobs and what looks like a bad idea.

The best place to go for ESL Job offers is Dave's ESL cafe found at <http://eslcafe.com>. It has a long history in the industry and offers a massive job board separated into "China" and "International," that is how large the demand for teachers in China is.

There is a membership fee for the recruiters and agencies to post job listings, and after a while they will start to look the same. Just seas of RMBs, listed hours, city names you've never heard of, etc. so how do you know what ones to apply for?

Applying in Person

Don't underestimate the power of just being there. Being on the ground, traveling the country applying for jobs and making connections is a shortcut to a fast ESL job. Once you are in the countries the job market is never ending whereas when you are applying online you will hit a few road blocks.

Schools in China have to wonder if your ever actually going to show up. If you'll just dick them around for a few weeks, get cold feet and bail out of the hiring process. Getting a Z Visa requires a lot of time and money on the school's part so you get back into the same scenario. If your actually on the ground your chances are very high to get an on the spot offer as long as you seem mildly put together, with no TEFL Certificate and often times no B.A.

How to Pick What Jobs to Apply for

I've already gone over the job types, University, training center and kindergarten, and I'm sure one sounds better than others to you. That will narrow things down a lot.

Deciding on the type of city will be the next big whittling down process. I've covered above the big differences and I personally recommend starting your ESL journey in smaller cities.

Look up the cities on wikipedia and anything under 3-5 million is considered a "small city" and you will notice a better chance to save money, more opportunities for private tutoring since there are less Westerners, shorter commute times and more of an interaction with "Chinese life" whereas in Beijing it is easier to disappear into old habits and find friends with the same interests and hobbies.

Salary Expectations

All schools should provide a flight bonus of 6,000+ RMB at the end of your contract. If they don't offer this keep on moving. Except for that a fair salary is completely up to you.

A University will only offer 4-6,000 RMB but your getting 5 months paid vacation a year and a work week of less than 12 hours giving you a lot of opportunity for high-paying side work. Kindergartens are offering 14,000+ but your working 50 hours a week, in front of staff the entire time, with only public holidays off. The choice is up to you.

I would say you would need at least 8,000 RMB in a small city and 10,000 in a large city to live a good traveling life and still be able to save money.

The Application Process

People are always so concerned with what school they will email, what to say and not say, waiting on replies, screw all that.

Make a boilerplate email. Include a paragraph or two about who you are, highlight your 2 strongest teaching experiences, your wish to teach and attach your CV.

I would send at least 10 of these a day. Immediately half will say "not interested" due to some reason that will sound petty and made up (because it probably is). A quarter will inform you the position has been filled (because they just always post these listings since you never know). So your looking at only a quarter of the jobs that are actively looking for you.

Use Your TEFL Resources

If you have a TEFL Certificate then keep in contact with your alumni association and have them review any contracts that may come your way and ask other teachers that happen to be in your network for advice and opinions.



Salary and Expenses: How much do I really make?

Salaries for a first year ESL teacher in China will average between 8,000-10,000 RMB per month for a small city and 10-12,000 for a larger city. Some may make more, some may make less, experience will play a large factor in that.

With a basic conversion of 6.3 RMB=\$1 you'll be pulling in about \$1,500 a month. At first this sounds like a modest salary but once you move to China you realize it is actually quite a high sum.

The average salary for a Chinese person is about 2,000-3,000 RMB. Most of the time your fellow Chinese teachers will be earning a third of what you do. They know it but don't rub it in their face. Most of them realize the only way to get Westerners to move to China is to offer something competitive but what this means for you is a very low Cost of Living. Most Chinese people I know will earn 2,500 RMB and only spend maybe 1,000 RMB a month on their living. This means living with several roommates (in larger cities it is not unheard of for Chinese people to live in 3 bedroom apartments with 4 other people, sharing bunk beds with strangers) and only going out for meals on rare occasions.

The economy is of course skewed to the locals. for instance the price of vegetables and produce is usually about half of what you would pay in the United States or Europe. Some import only items, such as avocados, are going to cost an arm and a leg but your mushrooms, potatoes, meat, local fruits such as bananas and mangos will be easy on the wallet.

I think the basic principles of foreigner life in China revolves around taxis, food, liquor and your phone. Here are comparative prices for all.

Taxis

Taxis are laughably cheap compared to the West. Pretty much every foreigner I know takes a taxi to the bathroom. Taxis are cheaper than paying for gas in the United States.

Larger cities will have "black taxis" as well, independent taxi drivers who set their own (inflated) prices. I would avoid these whenever possible but they are there for your disposal.

NEVER ride with the small "carriage on a bike" taxis that will be all over the club areas. They will rip you off horribly.

My 6 KM taxi ride to work averages at 14 RMB, or just a little over \$2. In the States it would be \$12-14 easily. Now were getting into multiplier savings. The going rates are

Large (Tier 1) Cities: 12-14 RMB to start, 2-3 RMB per KM after the second KM
Smaller (Tier 2) Cities: 7-9 RMB to start, 1.5 RMB per KM after the second KM

Food and Drinks

You can find Western food like Pizza Hut, McDonalds and KFC most everywhere but it will cost you comparatively high prices, matching their prices back home. So a large pizza will be around 120 RMB, or \$20, I stay away from these places. Once a month, if your just missing that taste of home, go for it but if your like me your here to save money for future traveling. Your going to want to stay with the small Chinese places that specialize in rice and noodle dishes.

The same can be said for drinks, where an imported beer from the US or Europe such as a Heineken or a Budweiser will run you 20-40 RMB, but that Tsingtao is pennies on the dollar.

Liquor is the same but there are enough domestic vodkas and wines for 30-60 RMB to keep you satisfied.

Also keep in mind that there are two kinds of Chinese restaurants: Hole in the wall and full blown restaurant. The hole in the walls are everywhere and you'll know what I mean when you see them. They offer Chinese only menus with individual dishes for the cheap. The larger restaurants are primarily for groups and parties and they offer gigantic menus with bright pictures full of large dishes meant to be shared between 4-8 people. It is easy to order 3 items you can't finish half of and wind up with a 100+ RMB bill. Don't fall into the trap of going to these places not knowing what to expect.

Street food is filthy, unsanitary, unhealthy, fattening and delicious. All over the cities are mobile frying surfaces and oil pans with odds and ends of raw vegetables, old noodles and mixed vegetables ready to be fried up for you. I would avoid street food but it is everywhere and is usually 5-8 RMB per item.

Rice and Noodle dish at local Chinese place: 10-18 RMB

Street food item: 5-8 RMB

Large meal at Chinese restaurant for 4 people: 200 RMB

Chinese Beer: 2-5 RMB in the store, 5-10 RMB at the restaurant

Imported beer: 20-40 RMB everywhere

And always remember, **one of the best parts of China is you can bring outside alcohol into most restaurants or bars if they have an outdoor patio.**

Phone

I love my Chinese SIM Card. I was paying Verizon basically \$100 a month for 300 minutes, unlimited texting and a grandfathered unlimited data plan I was not letting go of. I know people could get by with T-Mobile and Sprint for \$50-70 a month but no matter what, American phone plans are expensive.

My current Chinese phone plan is 28 RMB a month for 150 minutes and 150 texts. I could get more if I wanted but moving to China you realize fast what you don't need. Chinese people are incredibly resourceful and I would say 90% of all communication in China is done with online mobile messaging, mostly Wechat, through Free Wifi. You get into the habit with the locals fast and relish in the savings.

The data offered on mobile phones is iffy at best, usually categorized as 2G, but I just learned to only use it for messaging and light browsing on the bus, and at 10 RMB per 100 MB its a steal. Usually in one month my phone bill runs me 70-80 RMB, less than \$15.

SIM Card One Time Price: 40-60 RMB

Monthly voice and text: 20-40 RMB

Data: 10 RMB for 100 MB

While cruising Reddit today I came across [this post](#) by a Brazilian who moved to the United States in search of work and just expanding his outlook in life. He landed in Los Angeles and after five months he has found himself alone. Making friends as an adult is always one of those strange situations and dating is never the easiest thing in the world. He goes to work, comes home, sleeps and repeats. It made me think of when I first landed in China.



My Personal Savings and Experiences

After one year of teaching I had been to Switzerland, France, Italy, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Mongolia and a dozen Chinese cities. These weren't just fly overs but lounging vacations.

I worked an average of 28 hours a week, had about 10 weeks of vacation and a dozen or so 4 day holidays, I grew as a person, made friends worm all over the world and learned skills that will carry me for years.

When I finally went back to the US after about 14 months I had about \$6,000 in the bank, competing job offers waiting for me and a vacation booked for February.

Beyond that I had acquired an entirely new way of looking at my life. Nothing shocks me anymore. I am willing to go anywhere and do anything.

I was stuck in the United States through February waiting on a Visa and I got bored. On a whim I started calling around to see who might be willing to drop the money and go somewhere. One of these phone calls led me to a friend who is a flight attendant and had 2 free international tickets he just couldn't use. Within a day I had booked a trip to Nicaragua for 3 weeks.

I take pride in calling myself a bum. I want to work as little as possible and maximize my earnings. I want to live on a beach and explore the nooks and crannies of the world. I wanna check out every country that people call "too dangerous." I want my Facebook to be a jealousy magnet but also a motivational journal for my friends back home slaving away hoping for \$16 an hour. I want to chase "passive income" and follow my dreams I had as a child to be a writer. I don't want my wife to worry about my "mid-life crisis."

I want to never have a "real job" ever agin.

I hope this little book helped you out.

